

VOLUNTEERS IN THE COURTS

THE WISCONSIN SUPREME COURT ♦ P.O. BOX 1688 ♦ MADISON, WI 53701-1688
EXCERPT FROM *THE THIRD BRANCH*

SPRING 1999

Milwaukee Bench Bar Committee Serves Needs of Pro Se Litigants

Stop by the seventh floor of the Milwaukee County Courthouse any week day between 1 and 2 p.m. and you will find Ernesto Romero, Mary Triggiano-Hunt, Craig E. Miller, Andrew J. Chevez or another Milwaukee attorney helping people file for divorce, seek custody rights, or apply for restraining orders. They are volunteers at the Pro Se Forms Assistance Center. For one hour a day, five days a week, a family law attorney is available to help *pro se* litigants fill out legal forms at no charge. The Center provides legal services to all county residents, while it also helps decrease delays in Milwaukee's court calendar by helping *pro se* litigants find the right forms and fill them out correctly.

Founded by Romero, the Center opened in January 1997 with the support of Milwaukee County Circuit Court Judge Michael P. Sullivan and Family Court Commissioner Michael Bruch. In the first month Romero helped 40 people. Now, a team of volunteers helps more than 150 people each month, with clients arriving as early as 8:30 a.m. to wait in line for assistance. The Center moved to the seventh floor location this year, after outgrowing the space available at its original home, the Milwaukee Legal Resource Center.

The Center receives no funds, just Chief Judge Michael J. Skwierawski's contribution of space in the Milwaukee Courthouse and the volunteer hours of members of the Wisconsin Hispanic Lawyers Association and the Association of Women Lawyers. The 1999 goal is to have two attorneys available each day, with at least one who speaks Spanish.

Romero, a Milwaukee family law attorney for nine years, is the Center coordinator. He recruits attorneys, schedules assignments, and provides information and support for the other attorneys in addition to giving free legal assistance. For his efforts, Romero is being honored with the State Bar of Wisconsin Pro Bono Award for an individual attorney at the 1999 Volunteer Lawyers Recognition Celebration in April.

For more information about the Center, contact Ernesto Romero at (414) 403-5000.

Vernon County Recruits Mentors

When a juvenile gets in trouble in Vernon County, numerous agencies and organizations stand at the ready. Law enforcement, the court, the District Attorney's Office, the Department of Human Services, the Office of Families and Children, the Community Action Program, schools, parents, and others all play a part in helping youth get back on the right track. It's not rare—many counties have inter-agency cooperation for juveniles at risk—but it is giving Vernon County the support it needs to get new programs started.

A fall forum, titled *Juveniles At Risk: Get the Facts*, brought together professionals and the community to talk about juvenile crime and how to help teens. More than 100 community members attended the event coordinated by Dionne Cary, juvenile delinquency specialist at the Wisconsin Coulee Region Community Action Program, Inc. (CAP). Vernon County contracted with CAP in 1997 to provide special services for juveniles.

"The forum gave people a chance to talk one-on-one with individuals that they don't usually have a chance to talk to, people like Judge Rosborough," said Cary.

Vernon County Circuit Court Judge Michael J. Rosborough, along with school and law enforcement personnel and county officials, comprised the panel for the forum. Discussion focused on what the professionals were facing and how to help kids. What better time to announce a new juvenile mentor program and start recruiting volunteers.

The new program, called Connections, started in April and is coordinated by Cary. Connections matches adult volunteers with first-time juvenile offenders or youth at risk. Referrals are made by the Vernon County Department of Human Services, the Families and Children Center, and parents. As volunteer numbers grow, schools may also be asked to make referrals. As early as March, Cary was receiving referrals from parents who heard about Connections at the forum.

Mentors spend two hours a week with the juvenile, going fishing, playing basketball, or just being together. The activity is not important; the goal is youth spending time with supportive role models.

According to Cary, many of the kids referred to the program come from single-parent households, so a boy living with his mother may be lacking a positive male role model. Connections will try to match that boy with a male volunteer.

Volunteer mentors attend an orientation training session and will receive continuing support from Cary. Volunteers will be asked to make a six-month commitment. Cary hopes to recruit 20 volunteers by the time the program is fully operational.

Connections is just one element of Vernon County's efforts to help juveniles. CAP also monitors court-ordered community service for youth, hosts activities for at-risk juveniles, and encourages teens to learn about and get involved in the community. In some cases, court-ordered community service has turned into a rewarding volunteer opportunity. Juvenile offenders have continued volunteering at the hospital, the YMCA and the schools even after they have completed the community service hours ordered by the court. Last year 80 juvenile offenders successfully completed the program, including community service, restitution and other activities. "Having someone monitor compliance with community service, especially for juveniles, has made the difference between night and day," said Rosborough.

The special activities planned for juveniles, from roller skating to whitewater canoeing, "expose them to things that they seem to be lacking," said Cary. Last year, Cary took juveniles to a Ropes Course where as a group they climbed ropes and navigated obstacles. The goal was to build confidence and group cooperation. At the end of the course, according to Cary, a boy she saw as "defiant" and difficult to reach told her that the course was the "coolest" thing he had ever done without taking alcohol or drugs.

Juveniles are also gaining a voice in the community. For the past year high school students have served on the local Prevention Policy Board, which makes recommendations regarding use of the grant Vernon County received from the Office of Justice Assistance in 1996. These students help keep board recommendations realistic by telling the adult board members what is really happening in the schools and in kids' lives.

As a result of the forum, Connections has attracted the interest of the local Lions Club and school board, with each group promising volunteers. More than 10 people attended a training session in March.

For more information about Connections, contact Dionne Cary at (608) 637-7450.

La Crosse Guardianship Monitors on the Lookout

A volunteer monitoring guardianships for the La Crosse County Circuit Court recently found a \$400,000 discrepancy in a ward's 1998 account. In response to this "red flag," the court directed the guardian ad litem to investigate and report back to the court and the monitor on the apparent discrepancy. Fortunately, the investigation turned up answers that alleviated the court's concerns, but the incident demonstrates how volunteers can help the court system monitor guardianships.

The volunteers in La Crosse, who have been on the job since spring 1998, have audited every guardianship case pending in the county. In addition to performing audits and conducting research, the 17 trained volunteers offer help and support to the guardians and wards of the court. The program started with support from the American Association of Retired Persons, but now operates independently.

Organizations Harness Power of Internet to Recruit Volunteers

VolunteerMatch, a free online database, has matched people interested in volunteering with more than 23,000 opportunities in less than two years. VolunteerMatch is powered by volunteer organizations. The organizations post volunteer opportunities on an easy-to-use form on the VolunteerMatch Web site. Volunteers can then search the online database for local opportunities that fit their interests.

The database can be searched by ZIP code, category or date. After finding a good match, the volunteer contacts the organization (or a member of the organization) by e-mail. This service allows organizations to reach the volunteers who use the Internet as a primary source of information.

VolunteerMatch is a service of ImpactOnline, a non-profit organization investing in the development of public interest Internet applications. It has been promoted by Netscape, America Online, Microsoft Network and *USA Today*.

To learn more about VolunteerMatch visit the Web site at www.volunteermatch.org.

For information on the Volunteers in the Courts initiative contact Karen Leone de Nie, Program Assistant to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, at (608) 266-1298 or by e-mail at karen.leonedenie@courts.state.wi.us.